

HIFICRITIC

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ReQuest The Beast

MARTIN COLLOMS ASSESSES AN SSD AUDIOPHILE SERVER/DAC/PRE-AMP, CONCEIVED IN THE USA AND BUILT IN SWITZERLAND.

MARTIN COLLOMS

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AUDIO EXCELLENCE



Rumours of *The Beast* emerged last year, concerning a group of established industry designers conceiving a cost-no-object, top quality component for audiophiles that could become a master control and replay centre for all digital material (audio and visual). This would be directed by Gerhard Schneider, CEO of ReQuest Audio, from the latter's factory near Bern in Switzerland. ReQuest is a significant and experienced operator in the installed server market, and is therefore experienced in the formats, the technologies, the largely automated data acquisition from networked files and drives, and the software that retrieves cover art and the rest (largely from Gracenote).

The idea is to obviate the complexity seen with many high end digital audio replay arrangements with remote servers, feeding streamers and perhaps then selected DACS with often complex interfaces, external clocks and the like. Instead, a once and for all, true high end DAC with impeccable credentials is the foundation, and the substantial housing has electromagnetically isolated compartments into which functional units may be installed, using an approach that's as close as possible to hard-wiring the interfaces

Prices range from about £30,000 to £40,000 according to the facilities and the functional units

which are installed in a modular and weighty carcase that has been milled from solid aluminium alloy. A ten year upgrade repair warranty includes any future improvements which may be developed – a useful bonus. An easily fitted optional module also adds a high performance MSB *Diamond* remote volume control, and the included auxiliary XLR audio input might even obviate the need for a pre-amplifier in ultra-simple systems (avoiding the complications of locating it, the extra user control interface and cable losses). At this point an *iPad* or similar, loaded with a *The Beast* control App, provides the remote volume control interface in addition to the front panel touch-screen facility. High performance clock upgrades are also available.

Avoiding the traditional server-fed, streamed-delivery approach (due to inherent if modest limitations in the transmission of near real time packet-coded audio-over-network cable runs), the design project began with an open architecture that was founded on the principle of delivering low jitter, local replay for digital decoding to audio. In fact *The Beast* is inherently a server and is likely to be network connected for the retrieval of music and other files from user libraries. But while a streamer tends to play chosen music tracks directly from a LAN (local area network) connection, *The Beast* immediately saves it 'on the fly' to the large internal solid state drive, for

Review System Components

Naim *NAC/NAP S1 Statement*, Constellation *Virgo III*, Constellation *Inspiration Mono* (x2), Townshend *Allegri*, Vitus *SIA-025*, Naim *NAP300DR* amplification. Naim *UnitiServe*, Naim *NDS1555PS (DR)* sources. Magico *S-5*, Neat *Momentum SX3i*, Quad *ESL63*, BBC *LS3/5a* loudspeakers. Naim *Fraim* racks; Transparent *MM2* and Naim *NAC A5* speaker cables, Naim *Super Lumina*, Transparent *MM2* and Van Den Hul *Carbon* interconnects.

an essentially direct feed to the internal DACs. (The use of solid state drives (SSDs) provides maximum reliability and lowest internal noise, both as regards mechanical vibration and electrical interference.)

The system also allows portable media players to be taken and used anywhere, with the ability to stream music and films from an internet connection directly to a ReQuest *Maestro*-equipped portable audio player. *Maestro* is now available for all current ReQuest systems, providing mobile control and streaming. With *Maestro* installed, you can browse, search, and sort your entire ReQuest-archived music and movie collection, and with a tap of the finger run a movie at any audio zone or MediaPlayer. (To access the program from the ReQuest webserver, click on the *Maestro* badge at the foot of the menu.

There are some minor operational quirks. The seven-inch diagonal front panel touch display is pretty enough in full colour, but one would not use it for long, as it's necessary to be up close and on its level for unambiguous operation. An *iPad* App operates *The Beast* just so much better.

Computer aficionados may well be happy enough setting up *The Beast* on a home network, but most of us may appreciate some technical support here. It arrives with automatic IP addressing, but once installed, fixed addressing is advised for greater connection stability. Universal power input for 110 to 240V operation is *via* an automatically switched transformer that then feeds an internal Power Plant supply regenerator. This regenerated power supply is claimed to reduce the output sine wave distortion from a typical -35dB to -160dB.

I was taken through a pretty lengthy install procedure but normally this would be undertaken by the supplier/agent, specifically entering *The Beast* IP

address of 192.168.123 and linking to the addresses of the server drives (in my case a *UnitiServe* and also my NAS drives). *The Beast* is connected to the network by a fast CAT cable, here a 1Gb CAT-7e. To avoid the owner ever degrading the high inherent sound quality with an inferior digital audio source connection, there is no USB socket and no S/PDIF or I²S (a sometimes used digital format for drive-to-DAC connections).

It provides music tracks accessed on the network to join those already stored in its SSD, while it is compatible with a very wide range of low, mid and high definition formats.

Its basic build format provides top quality digital audio outputs to reference quality external DACs (such as Esoteric and DCS for example), connected with audio signal format and Femtosecond precision clock outputs. A wealth of easily adjusted internal operational settings are available, according to choice and replay resolution, such as whether or not to upsample and to leave material in native formats. Related filter and upsampling settings for the built-in MSB *Platinum Signature* DAC are also accessible. That audiophile DAC benefits from an essentially hard-wired connection to the digital audio bus, admittedly through a customised high speed USB-based interface.

It's possible to synchronise multiple *iTunes* libraries for export and import, and in this way *iTunes* may be used as an editing software. The server will encode imported music into lossless formats such as WAV or FLAC, and can simultaneously encode it as an MP3 file for syncing and streaming purposes. The audio server itself will always play the lossless file, while the MP3 files may be streamed to any mobile device inside the network, or even *via* the internet. (This can also be done with movies.) It also synchronises music to multiple *iTunes* libraries *via* the NetSync App.

Sound Quality

I anticipated that I might be able to second guess the sound quality, since I had owned the same MSB DAC with the same special power supply, except that here it is hard-wired into this server-player. Certainly MSB's hallmark qualities were readily audible, showing very fine definition and transparency over the whole audio range, coupled with an upbeat tempo and excellent detail, image depth and focus. As with my own DAC, I avoided the fancier oversampling and exotic filter settings on *The Beast*, and found that leaving the audio data 'raw' gave the best timing, involvement factor and the most natural timbre in my system.

However, the size of the bonus from hard-wiring the DAC to the internal drive was unexpected, even



though the lower jitter and noise inherent with a non-moving non-motorised drive must contribute. Nevertheless, the result was dramatic, launching *The Beast* straight into the 'uber High End' for digital audio replay; even MP3 material sounded better on it! And with top quality DSD and HD material, *The Beast* in this review form offers quite exceptional resolution, with toweringly dramatic and powerful bass, amazing midband detail and clarity, and a huge and excellently focused stereo image with top class depth and ambience recovery. Favourite and familiar CD dubs sounded very good – indeed, in my opinion rather better than HD material replayed *via* lesser DACs. And as with the standalone MSB *Platinum* DAC, timing and rhythm is way above the norm, making for satisfying and dramatic musical entertainment even with more critical and rhythm-oriented replay systems.

It proved well up to the task of driving the very fine Constellation pre-/power amplifier combination, never mind spending a month with the towering Naim *Statement NAC/NAP S1*. Indeed I was lucky to have such examples on hand in order to stretch *The Beast's* capabilities with the Magico speakers fully. Further listening continued with the Constellation *Inspiration*, its mono power amplifier option giving up to 800W into the 4ohm Magico loudspeaker. Unprecedented fine detail was provided over massive soundstages, with an impressive freedom from the 'digital hardening' in the upper midrange that's sometimes encountered. The overall result was immense image depth with appropriate program material. It was also capable of rendering those occasional and startling out-of-phase off stage effects found from some record producers as.....very startling. Somehow it focused very well off- as on-stage. Scoring the sound quality was straightforward as we were familiar with the references and had great system combinations to audition it with. Here we have an award winning, class leading 345 marks for *The Beast* for this build specification.

Conclusions

At first *The Beast* sounds rather costly, even for a sizeable and massy lump of hewn metal, but take the first class engineering content and build into account, along with the versatile and comprehensive audio (and video) file handling, plus the high performance audiophile technologies installed for power and for digital audio conversion, it can be seen to be fairly priced. Noting that it can even render a pre-amp obsolete, this could well be the best sounding multi-format integral digital audio replay device on the market. The 10 year warranty with included upgrades is further icing on a cake that may



be highly recommended, and unequivocally deserves a *HIFICRITIC* Audio Excellence rating.

Second Opinion by Rafael Todes

I particularly enjoyed my time with *The Beast*. It was the first time I'd encountered a server which could give my Esoteric *K-05* CD player a run for its money. I've previously always found that a good CD player puts a server to shame, but this is very much an exception to this rule. It has impeccable timing, creates a believable soundstage, and is charged with the energy of a live performance. It might be eye-wateringly expensive, but considering the quality of the components used, and the thought that has gone into solving the problems of hard-disk playback, it does seem surprisingly decent value-for-money!

Manufacturer's Specifications

Make	ReQuest Audio (Switzerland)
Type	versatile 2TB server + DAC
Audio Formats	DSD (all four versions), plus WAV/FLAC at 44.1/88.2/ 96/174.4/192/384kHz, and for 16-bit/24-bit/32-bit
Clock Outputs	256x, 512x professional master clock plus word clock
Auxiliary Input	Balanced XLR analogue input (pass through, or controllable <i>via</i> optional volume control)
DAC	MSB Platinum Signature, Femto clock, built-in MSB Diamond power supply
Outputs	SE and balanced (optional power amplifier direct connection)
Price, Guarantee	£29,900, guarantee includes upgrades for 10 years. (Options: Diamond volume control £2,800, Femto clock £5,998, Galaxy clock £9,998)
Size (WxHxD)	44x19x46cm



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